

Breastfeeding vs. formula: Are they really that different?

By Chad Skelton 20 Mar 2009

The mommy blogosphere is already buzzing over an article in the most recent Atlantic magazine, [The Case Against Breastfeeding](#). The title, which I'm sure is designed to shock, is actually a bit misleading. The article's author, Hanna Rosin, doesn't so much make a case against breastfeeding as raise what I think are a number of valid questions about the scientific arguments in favour of breastfeeding and the effect a strict breast-is-best policy has on women, in particular working women.

Rosin's article concludes that while there is evidence breastfeeding is better for babies than formula, the advantage is not nearly as big as many breastfeeding advocates suggest:

I called my doctor friend for her password to an online medical library, and then sat up and read dozens of studies examining breast-feeding's association with allergies, obesity, leukemia, mother-infant bonding, intelligence. ... After a couple of hours, the basic pattern became obvious: the medical literature looks nothing like the popular literature. It shows that breast-feeding is probably, maybe, a *little* better; but it is far from the stampede of evidence that [Dr. William] Sears describes. More like tiny, unsure baby steps: two forward, two back, with much meandering and bumping into walls. A couple of studies will show fewer allergies, and then the next one will turn up no difference. Same with mother-infant bonding, IQ, leukemia, cholesterol, diabetes. Even where consensus is mounting, the meta studies – reviews of existing studies – consistently complain about biases, missing evidence, and other major flaws in study design.

Rosin raises a number of concerns about the difficulties in breastfeeding research. Given that you can't randomly assign mothers to feed their babies breastmilk or formula, it's hard to separate breastfeeding itself from factors – like income or education – that make a woman more likely to breastfeed in the first place. Rosin also argues it's difficult to separate the advantages of breastmilk from the time, and bonding, that often come with additional breastfeeding.

But while Rosin raises these points, she ultimately concludes that breastfeeding is clearly better for babies than infant formula.

The more intriguing part of the article, I think, is Rosin's argument that – even if breast is best – women should not feel guilty for deciding not to breastfeed their babies.

Rosin argues that given the benefits of breastfeeding are relatively modest – a slightly reduced chance of gastrointestinal illness (not a huge deal with Western medicine) and maybe a handful of IQ points – that it is fair to balance those benefits against the very real costs of breastfeeding. And those costs, Rosin argues, are pretty big.

For one thing, unless a strict pumping schedule is in place, breastfeeding lets the father off the hook for pretty much all nighttime feedings. And even in an accommodating workplace, pumping breastmilk several times a day is not easy. Writes Rosin:

Breast-feeding exclusively is not like taking a prenatal vitamin. It is a serious time commitment that pretty much guarantees that you will not work in any meaningful way. Let's say a baby feeds seven times a day and then a couple more times at night. That's nine times for about a half hour each, which adds up to more than half of a working day, every day, for at least six months. This is why, when people say that breast-feeding is "free," I want to hit them with a two-by-four. It's only free if a woman's time is worth nothing.

In many ways, I find the debate over breastfeeding similar to the one around elective C-sections. Like breastfeeding, there's fairly strong evidence that a vaginal birth is better for baby (and mom) than a C-section. But the gap isn't huge – and doesn't, I think, warrant the kind of outrage some people feel about those "too posh to push". I've often mentioned to my father friends how oddly macho some women seem to be around the birthing process, keen to tell their friends how they did the whole thing without drugs and looking down on those who didn't give birth the "natural way". Maybe I find the whole thing so strange because, I can guarantee you, if men had to push a seven-pound baby through their penis, the medical community would have to find some way to do it with us completely unconscious – regardless of whether it made the newborn a bit dopey.

I've never been a supporter of the "self-esteem" school of science. If something is seriously, irrefutably bad for a kid – like their mother smoking crack or not putting them in a car seat – I say the more social scorn the better.

But I'm not sure the same rule applies for things – like breastfeeding or vaginal births – that have only a modest proven benefit.

Women are put under enormous pressure to breastfeed their children, to the point that many feel like unfit mothers if they do not. And those who feel strongly about breastfeeding aren't shy about letting everyone know. One co-worker told me he once had a complete stranger come up to his family in the supermarket and, upon seeing the can of formula in their cart, gave them a lecture on how they must not care that much about their child.

We should encourage women to breastfeed, no question. But when that pressure becomes so great that it makes women who can't breastfeed – or have legitimate reasons not to – feel like they are causing harm to their child, I think we've gone too far.

What do you think? Have the "lactivists" gone too far? Or are a few guilt-stricken moms worth it if it means more babies get the breast?

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